

Contemporary Rites of Passage At A Time When We Need Them The Most

By Tara Moreno

There's no doubt we are living in turbulent times. As human consciousness shifts, it is becoming more and more apparent that we need communities to recognize and honor the growing pains and transitional challenges that we are all experiencing as individuals. How can communities do that? One very important way is by practicing *rites of passage*, which have been used by ancient and modern cultures around the world to support community members in transition by ritualizing and supporting change. The term *rite of passage*, as coined in 1929 by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, describes the universal practice of ceremonializing life's major events or transitions. In the book *The Art of Ritual*, authors Renee Beck and Sydney Barbara Metrick remind us that "Human beings have used ritual for centuries as an important buffer to change and as a way of consciously recognizing and supporting a life event rather than denying or indulging in it ... the end results of all ritual are increased balance, strength, energy, and comfort."

A more commonly known *rites of passage* is "initiation", which often takes the form of a *coming of age* ceremony in which a community comes together to person as they let go of one stage of development (childhood or adolescence) and embrace the new identity or role of the next stage (adolescence or young adulthood). Globally, there are numerous cultures currently using *coming of age* ceremonies regularly, exemplified by the [Pathways](#) programs for youth in Australia. In the melting pot that is today's American culture, there are several good examples of formal coming of age ceremonies, including the Jewish culture's Bar/Bat Mitzvah tradition, the Mexican culture's Quinceanera, and the [Native American Vision Quest](#). As a whole, however, most Americans don't receive a *coming of age* experience at all, and community feedback indicates that many that do often don't feel that it was a fully conscious experience that effectively prepared them for the next stage. In the absence of conscious, effective coming of age experiences, a tragically high number of today's youth either enter adolescence or young adulthood feeling disconnected and unprepared for the challenges ahead -- or even worse they may receive an informal and often dangerous "initiation" experience from sources outside of their families such as gangs.

Beyond *coming of age* ceremonies, other major life transitions can and should be supported with conscious *rites of passage* as well. Van Gennep described seven specific major life transitions (see box on right) and most religions offer rites of passage to support some these transitions -- such as the Catholic sacraments including baptism, confirmation, and marriage -- but as the American culture shifts from a religious-oriented culture (predominantly Christian) to a more religiously unaffiliated one (See box below) and as people of different cultures blend together many individuals don't experience religious or culture-specific rites of passage at

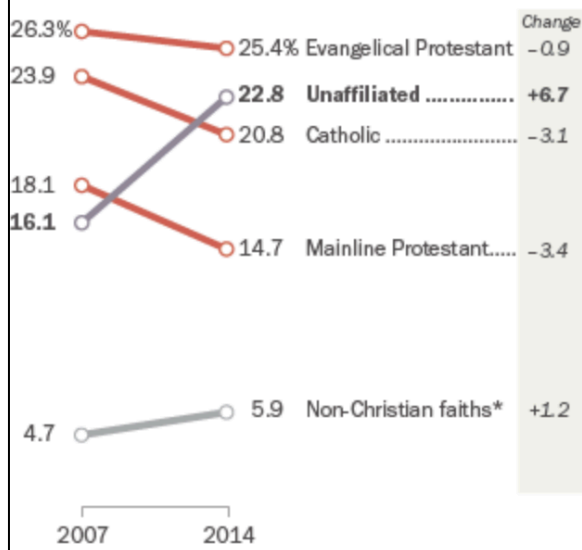
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Van Gennep's Major Life Transitions:

- birth (newness)
- entry (making contact with others)
- initiation (willingness to learn something new and be tested on it)
- marriage/mergence (capacity for commitment, integration; and unifying opposites)
- demonstration (ability to facilitate, heal, teach, guide)
- attainment (inner contentment)
- death (letting go, moving out from the old into the new)

Changing U.S. Religious Landscape

Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. The unaffiliated experienced the most growth, and the share of Americans who belong to non-Christian faiths also increased.



Encouragingly, on a local level there are a number of groups in Michigan today offering rites of passage practices. *VisionQuest*, a Brighton organization started in 2014, supports rites of passage and vision quests to help clients make healthy transitions from one stage of life to the next. They believe that every defining event in our life story has a distinct purpose, and when we understand that purpose and find it's meaning, we can go forward in beauty. *The Changing Woman Sisterhood*, started in 1991 with the dream that women of all ages and backgrounds could gather for mutual healing, transformation, empowerment and learning, currently offers (among other things) *maiden initiation ceremonies* through the EarthWalk Spiritual Community. *The ManKind Project*, a global nonprofit organization that operates all across the US in local chapters, offers challenging and highly rewarding programs for men through the passages of their lives. They believe that emotionally mature, compassionate, and purpose-driven men will help heal some of our society's deepest wounds. Their mission is to "create a safer world by growing better men" and they've served over 56,000 men in the past 30 years.

Charlie Penner of Ann Arbor has been a member of the [ManKind Project](#) (MKP) for four years now. He was introduced to it by a high school friend. "One of the biggest motivations (for me to join) was community - it was about finding a group of men to have closer relationships with. I think it's given me some tools and confidence about what I want and to be more aware of my feelings," says Penner. *ManKind Project* offers men's groups and developmental training. One of their biggest draws is an *Initiation Weekend* called the [New Warrior Training Adventure](#), which is a modern male initiation and self-examination program. They describe it as the "hero's journey" from classical literature and myth and they believe it's crucial to the development of a healthy and mature male self, no matter how old a man is. Penner says the growth and maturity that comes from this initiation weekend is very noticeable. "It's rare to have that level of conversation and not be judged for it," says Penner. There are several local MKP groups meeting regularly, some private and some open to un-initiated men, and a good way to check them out is to attend one of their [monthly open men's circles](#).

Callan Loo, also of Ann Arbor and co-founder of both [Intentional Legacies](#) and the co-founder of [The Intentional Living Collective](#), also participated in the MKP New Warrior Training Adventure in 2014 as part of his own initiation process. Loo stresses the importance of masculine introspection and development work, and how creating communities of healthy men is critical

to the overall health of our society. Loo notes, “We as men often end up growing up and showing up as lone wolves, and we often feel isolated in some of the things we do. If I had a healthy community of ‘brothers’ at critical times in my young adult life I may not have made some of the unhealthy choices I did.” As a young adult in the 1980’s, he experienced overwhelming personal struggle at a time when he faced a core identity crisis and felt that there was a lack of effective community support. “Waking up one day, I found I was miserable in what many would describe as a ‘perfect life’, and as I searched my heart and soul for the reasons I realized I had made many of my life decisions based on what other people expected of me. I had to look closely in the mirror and I realized I didn’t like myself at all, and in order to become ‘authentic’ I had to open up,” says Loo, sincerely. At that point a wave of major life transitions crashed around him, and despite his family’s love and good intentions as well as attempts to find answers through western therapy practices he spent the next couple years “figuring it out on his own.” Through deep self-inflection and a plethora of inner work, over time Loo changed his life from an ego-centered one into a more heart-centered one. Loo started *Intentional Legacies*® in 2010 with the idea to serve individuals who experienced major life transitions and needed support. Loo describes *Intentional Legacies* as a community of good, dependable, helpful people on a mission to manifest communities of people living authentic, heart-centered lives. “We go through this journey together. We talk about things like communication, respect, finding your own power, and we talk about values,” he says. Loo and his team initially developed [personal](#) and [business legacy planning](#) services to help people live more authentic, heart-centered lives and to make the ripple effect of their lives as deep and meaningful as possible. Reflecting on his own journey, Loo started researching rites of passage programs and developmental programming and decided to start a community effort to create and deliver rites of passage to help others navigate major life transitions in a more healthy way.

In addition to his own *initiation* ceremony, Loo decided to create a personalized coming of age experience for his son, Jaden. Loo started by defining six core values for Jaden to master, then assembled a “tribe” of trusted men from their community to serve as mentors and work with Jaden on one of those core values each. Starting when Jaden was 14 years old, he spent six+ months working with his mentors on the values of respect, integrity, leadership, compassion, creativity and courage. After demonstrating understanding and a beginning mastery of those core values, Jaden and his tribe celebrated his passage to a healthy adolescence through a sweat lodge ceremony at the Otter Creek Lodge and a community feast including elders from that Native Community, as well as all the important men and women in Jaden’s life. Jaden is now 17-years-old and a senior in high school, and he and his father are discussing another rite of passage to prepare him for his transition to college and young adulthood.



“It changed how I viewed things ... It helped me to wake up about what is valuable to me. I thought about my actions more and how I affect other people. It made me more aware,” says Jaden. Jaden also says he is more confident from the experience. “I value myself more... I feel a sense of confidence that I didn’t have before this. As a human being, I felt like I’ve grown after (the rite of passage). I would do it again if I would have an opportunity.”

As Loo's calling in *Intentional Legacies* deepened, his path crossed with Mara Evenstar's. Evenstar teaches college psychology, has a master's of Transpersonal Psychology, and is currently working on her doctorate at Meridian University under Dr. Jean Huston. She has also co-founded local social enterprises *Sophia Unfolds*, a program for transformation and a growing community of awakened women who come together for support, and *New Myth Works*, an LLC that provides a dynamic sanctuary for our conscious evolution with a focus on evolving consciousness. Evenstar and Loo conversed many times about the need for rites of passage. "It was three years in the making and a lot of conversations about the needs of the community," says Evenstar. Loo and Evenstar's conversations would eventually lead to the idea of [*Conscious Rites*](#)[™], an organization whose mission is to provide *rites of passage* programs and personalized experiences that include coming of age programs, milestone celebrations, wedding ceremonies, and funeral services. "We are being asked to provide unique experiences. People are looking outside of their religious experiences for something more," notes Evenstar. "We have been putting a lot of thought and research into (these) programs." As part of her doctorate program, she decided to collaborate with Loo to deliver meaningful rites of passage through a pilot program for *Conscious Rites* called *The Teening Path*, which is designed as a contemporary coming of age program for children ages 11 to 14-years-old. Evenstar says the focus of the *Teening Path* is to understand the needs of the kids and their parents and to help them collectively transition with "ease and elegance" into the teenage years. Evenstar is confident in her role in creating a safe place for people to develop and transition, saying "I believe I'm here to help create containers, that's where my gifts lie-- to create the place for people to do their growth work. It's a critical time and so much is shifting. What is needed is a shift in consciousness to address the complex issues we are facing. I want to bring my original unique medicine forward ... it is a calling. It lights me up because that's what I'm here to do." One of the things that makes this program really unique is it's a family-oriented program, helping children and their parents grow together and build a conscious community around them for support.



Conscious Rites

Through *Conscious Rites*, Loo and Evenstar plan on taking rites of passage to the next level. As they wrap up the pilot of *The Teening Path*, Loo and Evenstar are in the process of developing another program designed to support adolescents from 15 to 19-years-old as they make the transition to young adulthood. Additionally, they're collaborating deeper on the newly-launched non-profit organization named [*The Intentional Living Collective*](#) - whose mission is to provide programs and resources for learning, growth, inspiration, and hope to the community and to facilitate collaboration between community members for deeper connections and greater impact. They currently serve Southeast Michigan and Northwest Ohio, and as a nonprofit they hope to attract funding and resources to make their programs accessible to everyone – including those that wouldn't normally be able to afford these important services.

They hope to eventually expand their services nationwide. “Within in 2-3 years we will hope to expand programming to a larger region, and within five years we hope to reach out to other states across the nation,” says Loo.

The importance of rites of passage is monumental. Communities coming together to support those navigating challenging life transitions will make for a more peaceful world, and as the recent presidential election shows this world is in deep need of that kind of help. “People will handle transition a lot more gracefully and there will be a lot less tension, stress and conflict in life. When we live in a place of fear it’s hard to move forward, so we intend to create Community programs for people who are trying to live heart-centered lives,” says Loo. As **Robert L Moore**, professor of Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Spirituality at Chicago Theological Seminar and a key developer of the *MKP*, writes: “The human need for ritualization in many areas of life has not diminished. What has diminished is the availability of knowledgeable ‘ritual elders’ who understand the archetypal human need for ritualization throughout life”.

Local organizations like *Conscious Rites* are needed in our communities to help individuals make it through these chaotic, tumultuous times when personal growth is needed most. It is important that the message is clear: *We are in this together*.

The author Tara Moreno is CEO of the Serenity House of Flint, Michigan. She practices energy medicine and is a seasoned writer and photographer with a passion for self-mastery and helping her community rise in vibration. She is the mother of two children and resides in Burton, Michigan.

For more information on any of the services mentioned in this article, please visit the websites listed. The Intentional Living Collective at <http://www.theintentionallivingcollective.org>; Intentional Legacies at www.intentional-legacies.com; Conscious Rites at www.consciousrites.org; New Myth Works at www.newmythworks.com; and the ManKind Project at mankindproject.org.